

THE Sex QUEEN *of* L.A.

HOW A SMALL-TOWN GIRL
FROM CALIFORNIA REINVENTED
AMERICA'S ESCORT INDUSTRY

IT WAS EARLY EVENING IN ISTANBUL, JUST BEFORE SUNSET, AND MICHELLE Braun – known in the business as “Nici” – was about to become the most notorious and successful provider of women since Heidi Fleiss. There she was, a tall, blond 24-year-old from Bakersfield, California, six months pregnant with her second daughter, zipping along in a town car to one of Turkey’s most exclusive hotels. Already the operator of a well-known “escort service” in Los Angeles, Nici had a few famous clients, a nice house and a doting husband. But she was always looking for richer men to book her girls, so she could attract a better class of women and make connections to still wealthier clients. In Istanbul, she was on the trail of Hakan Uzan, a Turkish billionaire whose family controlled the country’s second-largest cellular-service company. ♦ Nici remembers finding Uzan in the presidential suite at the hotel, watching a soccer game on TV. As they talked, his eyes

BY *Vanessa Grigoriadis*

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANIELLE LEVITT





GIRL ON TOP
Michelle Braun,
a.k.a. Nici, in
Miami Beach

NICI'S GIRLS

Nici recruited her stable of gold-standard escorts from the ranks of *Playboy* Playmates and porn stars. "For Nici, it didn't matter what the girl looked like," says a *Penthouse* Pet. "It was all about her pedigree in the adult world." For the girls, who were finding it tougher to earn a living off their looks in the age of Internet porn, private meetings with fans offered a quick source of easy cash. "The money was sick," says one porn star. For the clients, spending time with the women was the stuff of fantasy. "In today's society, once you're a celebrity, there's cash in it," says Nici's lawyer. "These guys are buying an opportunity to meet a famous person they have interest in, such as a Playmate."



**TISHARA
COUSINO**

**PLAYBOY
PLAYMATE
MAY '99**



**ASHLEY
MASSARO**

**PROFESSIONAL
WRESTLER
WWE**



**TINA
JORDAN**

**PLAYBOY
PLAYMATE
MARCH '02**



**KRYSTAL
STEAL**

**PORN STAR
CLUBJENNA**



**LANNY
BARBY**

**PENTHOUSE
PET
JUNE '05**

intermittently flicked over to the laptop balanced on her knees that displayed her portfolio of girls for hire. Uzan explained what he wanted: a harem waiting for him at the hotel every week. But not just any women – Playmates, porn stars, the kind of voluptuous, unattainable women of few scruples who denote status and class in certain circles. The miracle from Nici's perspective – in addition to the size of Uzan's wallet – was that he would rarely show up to see the girls, much less have sex. He just wanted to know they'd be there whenever he wanted.

With the connection to a whale like Uzan – the archetypal "easy client," a filthy-rich guy more interested in courtship than fornication – Nici's business went supernova. She already had a line into the Playboy Mansion; one of Hefner's girlfriends was willing to solicit other Playmates and girlfriends, who are given a weekly "allowance" of \$1,000. Now, when the girls heard they could make \$25,000 by flying to Turkey

Contributing editor VANESSA GRIGORIADIS wrote the cover story "The Tragedy of Britney Spears" in RS 1046.

"NICI WAS THE BEN & JERRY'S OF HIGH-END ESCORTING," SAYS ONE MADAM. "EVERYONE FOLLOWED HER LEAD."

for a few days, there was no shortage of them willing to sign up. "Hakan would send me an instant message at 3 a.m., and I would have to get four Playmates ready right away," says Nici. "The first flight to Istanbul was around 6 a.m. through Paris, and sometimes I'd wake them up in the middle of the night for that flight."

The girls were thrilled: "It was like a paid vacation," says Angelica, a porn star who shared a room with a Playmate in an Istanbul hotel that looked like a castle. "There were eight girls there, and I was doing the math: like, at least \$200,000 is being spent here, and these guys don't even care." Before Uzan was accused of embezzling billions from his companies

and became an international fugitive, Nici estimates, he spent \$3 million in one year on her services.

The money and word-of-mouth business that Nici received from Uzan enabled her to do what no madam had done before: create a new high end of the escort industry, one that raised the stakes dramatically for both the johns and the women. Prominent athletes, TV stars and *Fortune* 500 CEOs – the kind of names that would dominate the tabloids for weeks, were they to become public – flocked to Nici for access to her elite clientele. Not young, drug-addled nobodies like the girl who blew Eliot Spitzer but the pinnacle of L.A. beauty, women who represented the gold standard in the

world of international escorting: models for *Maxim* and *FHM*, big-name porn stars and Playmates, including April '07 cover girl, *Survivor: China* contestant and WWE star Ashley Massaro, according to government allegations. Nici even claims she once spoke with a teenage Paris Hilton, who offered to meet any client who paid \$10,000 a night. Though a spokeswoman for Hilton calls the claims "completely false and totally absurd," Nici had seemingly reached a point where she could ask anything, of any woman.

"Nici was the Ben & Jerry's of high-end escorting," says a Las Vegas madam who has worked in the sex industry for 10 years. "She was the first person to figure out the business, and everyone else followed her lead."

But other escort services weren't the only ones following Nici. In May 2002, around the same time Nici visited Istanbul, the FBI appeared at her door. Tipped off by one of her clients, they were looking for millions in cash he claimed to have sent her through FedEx. Nothing came of the visit, but the feds weren't done with Nici: Last October,

they showed up again, this time with a warrant to search her property. The government now alleges that Nici has made at least \$8.5 million running an escort service as a front for a prostitution and money-laundering ring. The FBI declined to comment on the case, but Nici is adamant that her actions were legal. She disavows any comparison to “madams” like Heidi Fleiss.

“All I do is make the introductions between famous girls and rich guys who want to meet them,” Nici tells me on a recent afternoon, sitting in her plush condo in South Florida. Her long blond hair is swept up into a gigantic bun, and her lilac-painted toenails match her purple sweatsuit. A tattoo of a conjoined sun and moon is visible above the small of her back. “I think the rates I charge are justified just to meet these women, even if nothing happens,” she says. “You know, a normal guy couldn’t meet a Playmate or a porn star, or get them to go out on a date with him.” She taps her thigh with a manicured nail. “As far as the details go – I mean, I never wanted to know.”

THE SEX BUSINESS HAS changed dramatically in the past decade, and no change has been bigger than the obliteration of the social taboo against escorting. “Almost every porn star is an escort now,” says Luke Ford, a prominent Web journalist who covered the porn industry. (There is even Internet shorthand for the phenomenon: PSE, or “porn-star-escort.”) There is no real money to be made anymore by naked girls willing to show the world their nakedness, no matter how hot they are or how great they look having sex on camera. There are simply too many naked girls on the Internet who are willing to be ogled for next to nothing, and Websites that will offer them up for free. Many companies in the adult-entertainment industry, estimated at \$13 billion annually, have seen their fortunes plummet by a third, with video rentals and sales down nearly 50 percent over the past decade. “We were always worried about the government killing our business,” says Rob Spallone, producer of such delights as *The World’s Biggest Gangbang*. “Ironically, we ended up flooding the market and killed it ourselves.”

Today, Jenna Jameson is the country’s only major porn star – and even she has stopped shooting new porn films. Popular “actresses” have seen their fees plunge by a third, to \$1,000 per scene. The traditional path to sex-symbol stardom – building a mainstream career after becoming a famous Playmate – also seems to have narrowed: Today’s *Girls Next*

Door enjoy nowhere near the pop-culture stature of previous Playmates like Jenny McCarthy and Pamela Anderson. Even “feature” strip-club tours, once a sure route to extra cash for porn stars and Playmates with a moderate following, have gone out of vogue, with prettier civilian girls signing up to work at strip clubs in higher numbers. For Playmates and porn stars, there’s only one way left to supplement their income: meeting fans in private settings.

“In today’s society, once you’re a celebrity, there’s cash in it,” says Nici’s lawyer, Marc Nurik. “These guys are buying an opportunity to meet a famous person they have interest in, such as a Playmate of the Month. It’s similar to a sports enthusiast paying to meet Peyton Manning.”

Like everyone who runs an escort service, Nici owed her existence to a legal loophole. While sex for money is illegal, paid introductions between adults who may independently decide to engage in intercourse upon meeting is not. The clients Nici introduces are well-matched: The men – known as “hobbyists” – are looking for no-strings-attached relationships, and the women are trying to finance a lifestyle largely independent of men. In Nici’s world, the women are shopping-addicted, the men are porn-addicted, and everyone is desperate to alleviate their loneliness and depression.

It’s the highest end of an endemic problem, one that rarely made the front pages until Gov. Spitzer was busted as Client 9 of the Emperors Club. America’s streets may be freer than ever of prostitutes, but that’s because the hookers have gone where all business has gone: the Internet. Even Websites that pretend to be about free sex – like Craigslist’s “Casual Encounters” or Fling.com – are populated largely by women looking to get paid; sites such as SeekingArrangement.com and SugarDaddy.com are explicit in their intentions. Hourly rates in the business range from \$150 for a Motel 6 prostitute, to \$350 for in-call at casinos in Las Vegas, to \$600 for child prostitutes, to \$1,000 for elite, membership-only escorts. “We spend millions of dollars on enforcement, and prostitution simply doesn’t go away,” says Barbara Brents, a sociologist at the University of Nevada at Las Vegas who has studied the sex industry. “The only thing the government can do is move the incidence of it from location to location.”

It was Nici who managed to stake out the most lucrative corner in the new online trade. “The fact is that the company of women is valuable to men, and men will pay for it,” she tells me, sitting in her condo. In person, the industry’s most successful purveyor of escorts is imperious and seemingly invulnerable; the only chink in her self-confidence is a tendency to blink rapidly when confronted with bad news. Her bosomy *Real Housewives of Orange County* look is at odds with her voice, which is as low-pitched as a

Whatever Happened to Heidi Fleiss?

Fifteen years ago, Heidi Fleiss was the top madam in Beverly Hills. Today, at 42, she runs a laundromat next to the Wal-Mart in Pahrump, Nevada. Its name: Dirty Laundry.

Until late last year, Fleiss was living in a tiny clapboard rental surrounded by clay-colored mountains. When I arrive one afternoon at 3:00 – before her arrest in February for driving under the influence and possessing prescription drugs for which she did not have a prescription – she’s in bed with a “migraine,” white sheets pulled up to her chin. She looks a little worse for wear, but she’s still the same girl – irrepressibly enthusiastic, with a big grin and a filthy mind.

“Society makes sex for money sound like a dirty thing, but I think it’s a compliment!” she declares. “Not that anyone would ever want to pay me: My blow jobs are so bad, I’d have to pay someone to give them.”

Her paramours these days are 24 giant parrots, which stalk around her house screaming their heads off. “I fucked so much in my life,” Fleiss says. “I fucked enough for a thousand women: the best-looking guys on Earth and the worst; old, young; fat, skinny; poor, rich. I don’t care if I ever fuck again. I don’t need a black pimp, a hot guy from Orange County or a little dog to validate my whatever. Right now, I’m happy with my parrots.”

Squawk!

“Gina!” Fleiss yells, as an ear-splitting call-and-response with the bird ensues. “Gina’s a lesbian,” she declares. “She always comes into bed and sits on my face.”

Fleiss inherited some of the parrots from the madam next door, who ran the exotic bird room in the Tropicana hotel. “I fell in love with them,” says Fleiss. “One night I went to her house at 3 a.m. to feed some babies with her syringe, and she started to die. I called the paramedics. One of them was like, ‘Hey, Heidi, I got your phone number,’ and I was like, ‘Man, don’t hit on me – save the bitch!’ As they took her away in a helicopter in her diaper and muumuu, she said, ‘Heidi, you have to take care of my birds.’ I was like, ‘Whoa.’ Then the bitch dies, and here I am.”

Fleiss throws on sweats and jumps into her blue Toyota truck for a tour of Pahrump, the closest town to Vegas to allow legalized prostitution. Her dream is to open a male brothel in the nearby town of Crystal, Nevada – thanks to Viagra, she thinks a “stud farm” would work – but she got mixed up with a guy who is under federal indictment for wire fraud, so the plans are on hold.

“I love it out here – this is like the wild, wild West, with prostitution, gambling, corruption,” she says. “I feel like Bugsy Siegel looking at open territory.” She grabs a bottle of spirulina off the dash and downs a pill.

At the moment, Fleiss is thinking about starting her own massage parlor next to a strip club, taking over an abandoned space. On the way to check it out, she takes a detour through the scrubby desert to a mysterious hole that she thinks leads to water; she spends the next 45 minutes putting a 100-foot piece of string down it, to see if she hits anything, only to drop it at the last second. Then she zooms over to the parlor, and a girl in black garters with pink bows runs out of the brothel to let her in. Unable to find the light switch, she props open the door, and the desert sun illuminates a tiny shop of vibrators and ancient porn videos, and a back room of dusty Buddhas, old massage tables and tiny bathtubs.

“This place is ugly as fuck, but I can make it work,” Fleiss says, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. “I even love the words – *massage parlor*.” An enormous smile spreads over her face, and she looks content. “God, it’s so gross,” she says. “I love it.”

V.G.



female voice can be, with perfect elocution and a magisterial, Joan Crawford-esque drawl. The mother of five- and seven-year-old daughters, she considers herself untainted by the sordidness of the world in which she moves. "Even now," she says, "there's part of me that's still a nice girl from Bakersfield."

As a kid, Nici enjoyed the privileged lifestyle of a small-town California girl. Her Jewish parents owned a Baskin-Robbins franchise in Bakersfield, an oil and agriculture town, and showered her with gifts, like a purple Chevy truck that sported pink flames along its sides and the license plate YOOSEXY. After school, she worked at a gym and a tanning salon, hanging out in the apple fields at night to drink beer with her friends. A popular girl who loved wielding power over a clique of friends, she plastered her bedroom with posters of James Dean and Marilyn Monroe, and dreamed of moving to Hollywood. "I wasn't going to stay in Bakersfield," she says. "No way."

As a freshman at San Diego State University, Nici spent most of her time partying at frats. Her roommate got on her case for not having a job, but she never wanted for money: On one trip to Rosarito, Mexico, she entered a wet T-shirt contest and won hundreds of dollars. Her primary skill involved the computer—her father, an electrical engineer, taught her to build one for a school project. "From the beginning of the Internet, I was obsessed with communicating over the Web," she says. "I was a computer geek with a party-girl persona."

One day, while she was window-shopping for sequined miniskirts on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, Nici was picked up by a handsome fashion designer 14 years her senior. She soon dropped out of school and moved to L.A. to be with him full time. When he dumped her, she took a job working the door at the Century Club, where a manager offered her extra money to find pretty girls to sit at the tables with the big spenders. Nici quickly proved to have a knack for separating girls from their dates. "We're really busy tonight," she'd tell people straining at the velvet rope. "I don't know if we have room for all of you, but the girls can come in." Eager to get into the club, the women would ditch their boyfriends without a thought.

Then one night, a big spender asked Nici to set him up on a date with a girl she had befriended—and tipped her \$500 for the privilege.

"That," she says, "is when I realized this was a business."

WITHIN A FEW MONTHS, Nici's inner party girl had lined up a few more guys who wanted to get hooked up with girls for money, while the computer geek in her had launched a Website advertising her escort services.

(The girls came with a what-you-see-is-what-you-get guarantee: "It's me or it's free!") At 19 years old, the impermissible had become commonplace. The question in Nici's mind wasn't "How can I do this, morally?" It was "What's the best way I can do this, practically?"

Then one day, according to Nici, the unthinkable happened: Charlie Sheen answered an ad. It was the Holy Grail of escorting, the Hollywood connection that can make or break a service. When Nici dropped four girls off at his penthouse, she found the actor in silk pajamas with C. MASHEEN embroidered over the pocket. Sheen gave her a \$20,000 check for the girls, and she picked them up several hours later. After he went into court-ordered rehab, she continued to book girls for him, furtively sending



them to a doctor's office in Los Angeles owned by a friend of Sheen's. The orderlies at the rehab center would let him out for his frequent medical appointments. (Sheen refused to comment for this article, but Nici says she continued to book girls for him until last year, sending them to a hotel in Santa Monica.)

Nici began charging \$10,000 per night for her top girls, plus a \$5,000 fee for membership on her Website, NiciGirls. As a companionable young mother, she found she could win the trust of the girls—they felt she was a friend who wouldn't run off with their money. "Nici was the least shady of all agents," says a *Penthouse* Pet who made \$200,000 a year working for Nici. "Other people made me feel like I was a product, and she treated me like a buddy. We would gossip for hours on the phone. She made me feel like it was us against them. She tool her clients, and most agents tool their girls. That's the difference."

Escort services are word-of-mouth businesses: When Nici got a Playmate to join her team, she would start her off with the easiest clients, so the girl would tell her friends they should work for Nici, too. "Nici talked all of us up to the clients like we were celebrities," says one of her girls. "She was a good hustler, and she was never willing to back down."

Nici learned quickly that there were guys who would pay almost anything.

One of her alleged clients, Michael Fanghella, the CEO of a California mortgage-brokerage firm, spent \$14 million in gifts on NBA-cheerleader-turned-porn-star Kelly Jaye before landing in prison for 10 years for defrauding his investors. At 21, Nici met Mark Yagalla, a financial prodigy and hedge-fund manager from Philadelphia. She says Yagalla offered her \$500,000 to matchmake him with a girlfriend, for whom he would supply a car, house and allowance. He bought Playmate Tishara Cousino a Mercedes and an \$850,000 house, and Hefner's "girlfriend" Sandy Bentley a \$1.7 million house, two Rolexes, six cars (including a red Ferrari Spider and a white Bentley convertible) and a copy of the ruby-and-diamond necklace Richard Gere gives Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*. (Bentley's



HIGH ROLLERS

Among Nici's biggest clients, she says, were Turkish cell-phone magnate Hakan Uzan (far left), who paid for a harem of porn stars, and hedge-fund manager Mark Yagalla (left, in blue), who offered Nici \$500,000 to set him up with a girlfriend.

boyfriend was later murdered while trying to sell some of the jewelry she received from Yagalla.) Within a year of meeting Nici, Yagalla's hedge fund began to fail, and he bilked investors of \$32 million. He was sentenced to five years in prison.

In May 2002, as Nici was throwing a birthday party for her older daughter, with 60 guests and miniature horses at her 8,000-square-foot mansion, the FBI appeared at her door. Yagalla had told them that he had sent Nici millions of dollars through the mail to start an adult-video company. Nici claims he never mailed her any cash, and shorted her \$250,000 on the matchmaking fee. "I was close with Mark, and I couldn't believe he would do that to me," says Nici now. "It was a wake-up call that you can't trust anyone."

As her business grew, Nici found herself increasingly isolated. There was no one she could take as a confidant—not her husband, not her closest friends. She never took an assistant, and she didn't confess her secret to anybody from her "real" life, like the couples she would meet for lobster dinners at the country club in Bakersfield on weekends: To explain why she was always on her cellphone booking plane tickets, she told them she was a corporate travel agent. "Ultimately, you're alone in this business," she says. "No one wants to be the underdog. Everyone wants to be the boss."

TO EMBRACE THE CHARACTER she had created, Nici had to turn herself into one of the guys. She was the one who hung out with the high rollers in Vegas, Moscow and Dubai, smoking cigars and gambling and drinking cognac with them all night long, dressed in Louboutin shoes and low-cut DKNY suits to show that she deserved their respect—and her 40 percent cut. For Chinese New Year, she accompanied a tobacco billionaire to the MGM Grand, where she and her girls were treated to horseshoe diamond necklaces, D&G dresses and red envelopes stuffed with cash. "If you're a VIP in Vegas, there's nothing like that in the world," she says. "We'd have a VIP table at Tabú, and a hostess would come over to take care of every need. If we were hungry, carts would be rolled in with chocolate cake and steak, and everyone else would look over at us, like, 'There's food? Where do I get food?'" She laughs. "You know what the worst part of being rich is? Nothing!"

Talk of her success quickly began to spread—most notably the tale of her trip to the king's palace in Jordan with two girls, where she was picked up in a bullet-proof stretch Escalade and partied in the royal disco. "The guys all kind of blended together," says one girl. "They were all named Mohammed, and they were all princes, but you didn't know how far up they ranked. I used to hang out with a prince from Jordan all the time, and finally I asked him, 'Hey, are we cool with Jordan, here in the U.S.?' He was like, 'Jordan's neutral, don't worry.'"

Nici soon began to branch out from her usual clients. To drum up business in Dubai, she paid modeling agents a flat fee to represent their girls, then sent their photos to her clients' assistants, who got a cut for hiring her instead of another service. She also fought to hold on to her best girls: The more she expanded her business, the more girls she seemed to lose. Ambitious escorts, seeking to cut Nici out of her fee, would take numbers from guys and set up their own dates; rival escort agencies would steal photos of Nici's girls from her Website and post them on their own sites, pretending that they had them to offer.

Nici did not accept such treason lightly. "I would freak and go off on people," she admits. "I gave some of them the ammunition they needed to start a war." Competitors hired private investigators to dig up dirt on her, called Child Services to show up at her door and question her fitness as a mother. "I would sit in a rocking chair nursing my youngest baby—she never knew what a bottle was and never tasted formula," she says. "I would rock her and book clients on the phone, and I would cry. I became a complete social phobic. I was so worried about what would happen to her if I got in trouble."

When her marriage started to fall

apart, Nici moved to South Florida and eventually remarried, to Farrell Kellener, an amiable novelist and radio announcer. "I thought of myself as semiretired, but I'd still get upset whenever I heard about someone making inroads into my game," Nici says. "My ego couldn't take it." She could no longer hold onto a large stable of girls — there were now hundreds of escort agencies online, most of them offering the same models and porn stars that she did. But there was still plenty of money to be made, if you knew how to hustle. In 2005, when one of the largest escort agencies for porn stars, Exotica 2000, was shut down by authorities in New York, Nici quickly maneuvered to fill the open niche with a new agency. She named it Bella Models, a dig against a madam in London named Bella with whom she had fallen out.

Nici turned Bella Models into the escort equivalent of an assembly line, a mass-production operation that churned out more girls at lower cost. She cut her membership fee in half to \$2,500 and began to book more than 100 women for as little as \$1,500 an hour. She also lowered her standards — any porn star would do — and she even recruited off her Website, touting benefits like "flexible hours and fabulous pay," "making an additional \$100,000 or more in a year," "feeling like a Princess or actually meeting a Prince" and "the endless possibilities that can change your life today!"

But as the business grew, Nici got increasingly fed up with all the day-to-day hassles. "I'd started to get frustrated with the girls," she says. "The majority of them are stupid, and they make half a million dollars a year and then come to me later piss-broke because they spent it on clothes or cocaine or whatever. I felt for them, but I didn't want to be everyone's therapist all the time." To work the phones and handle the girls, Nici hired three assistants including her sister, Mandy Gray.

Trusting other people proved to be a mistake. Nici always had a delicate relationship with her sister, who had remained in Bakersfield working at an office in the oil fields. When Gray left her husband after a series of fights, he found his way to the FBI. Nici, he told the agents, had a floorboard in her garage that concealed a safe full of cash buried eight feet deep. He also said she had paid \$22,000 to have her German shepherd trained to attack anyone the dog didn't know.

In April 2006, an FBI agent using the name George Tarpinsky paid the \$2,500 retainer to join Bella Models. According to a search warrant put together by the bureau, he called a woman he believed to be Nici, who was using the alias "Mona," and asked her about the services. When he claimed to be worried that the girl would ask for more money once she arrived, "Mona" assured him that her girls



THE MATCHMAKER
Nici offered girls the chance of "feeling like a Princess or actually meeting a Prince."

"WHAT DO YOU DO FOR A LIVING?" THE FBI AGENT ASKED. "I THINK YOU KNOW WHAT I DO," NICI REPLIED.

charged a fixed rate. When he wanted to know the difference between models and porn stars, she explained that they just have different mentalities — models are concerned with the "act itself," she told him, while porn stars are more "by the clock."

The search warrant thoughtfully omits the names of the men who used Nici's service, but it provides plenty of details about the women who allegedly worked for her. According to the handful of e-mails tracked by the FBI, Bella Models made travel arrangements for more than a dozen Playmates and porn stars, including Ashley Massaro and *Playboy* model Loredana in 2004, *Maxim* model Jody Palmer and ex-Hefner girlfriend Tina Jordan in 2006, and AVN's Best New Starlet Naomi in 2007 (exchanges with popular porn star Krystal Steal were also monitored). Some of the e-mails discuss whether a girl allows

fetish, gives the client a GFE (shorthand for "girlfriend experience"), squirts or "speaks greek." In one exchange, a john complained about porn star Taryn Thomas: "I would never have her work for you ever again . . . she had a horrible attitude, and her performance was the worst of anyone I have seen through you. Specifically, she had just woken up, discussed her rates openly, checked her IM, and more or less made me feel very uncomfortable." Bella Models forwarded the e-mail to Taryn, with a note: "Please read what he has said and take what he is saying into consideration, as it is the fans that keep your career going and without them you would not be a star."

On October 16th of last year, after Tarpinsky paid \$4,500 to book a *Playboy* cover model and a *Playboy.com* model for one hour at a Boca Raton resort, the FBI raided Nici's house. They threw a flash bomb inside and stormed

into her bedroom with members of a local SWAT team toting machine guns while she was in bed naked. According to Nici, one of the agents picked up a pair of her girlfriend's jeans and a small bag of cocaine fell out. "Those weren't my jeans — they're a size zero," she says. "The leg on them is the size of my calf." The FBI took her to the local police department, where she was charged with possession.

"What do you do for a living?" an agent asked her.

"I think I'm here because you know what I do," Nici replied and asked for a lawyer.

AT HOME JUST OUTSIDE FORT Lauderdale, Nici — who now prefers to use her given name, Michelle — shoos her dogs off her white couch as the ABC Family channel blares from the TV. She has just returned from Tommy Lee's house in Calabasas, California, where she spent the weekend lying by the pool and watching movies in his home theater. It's late in the afternoon, and Kellener has taken her daughters for a dip in the Atlantic, which is spread out behind the living room's sliding-glass doors. They burst into the room, wrapped in towels decorated with the Twister logo. "We went in the ocean with our clothes on!" the kids scream, opening the towels to reveal sopping-wet shorts. Nici orders them into the bath, then tells one of them to get a hairbrush so she can untangle her hair.

Nici has been depressed for a few months, but she's tunneling her way out. She's trying to sell a reality show, *The Girls of Ocean Drive*, centered on the South Beach lifestyle, where she plays the "Bret Michaels part," as she puts it. "I'm having a little bit of an identity crisis," she says quietly. "I've been Nici for 12 years. It's an alter ego that's been torn away from me so quickly. I'm used to having a hundred girls kissing my ass for work, texting me every second, and now they're terrified to talk to me."

She picks up a blindingly white pillow, pounds it into shape, then blinks for at least 10 seconds. It is as though her brain cannot reconcile the two worlds she inhabits. She closes her eyes. "I made guys feel like they weren't wasting their lives," she says. "Look, you're talking about a guy who lives in Podunk, Ohio, and makes millions of dollars a year running a freaking coal-mining company — and, for fun, he gets to go golfing in the Bahamas with his friends' wives in tennis skirts and talk about what color the Chihuahua Buffy's poop was this morning! All they want is an ego boost, and they don't care if they have to pay to meet a hot girl."

She gives an exasperated sigh. "They pay for their Ferraris, too," she says, "but it still feels damn good to drive it." **15**